

Blue Ribbon Commission on School Funding Reform Testimony

Submitted by Sandy Whisler, 303 Maas St., Lake Mills WI 53551

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Good afternoon. I am Sandy Whisler and I live in Lake Mills, a community of about 6000 people located just off I-94 between here and Milwaukee. I am a retired educator, having taught in Lake Mills for 25 of my 32 years in education, and I continue to substitute teach because I love working with the children in our community.

In the past two weeks, our community experienced a tragic loss when one of our 4th grade students, Jordan, died as the result of injuries in a car accident. Following the accident, our school counselors and school psychologist were available to help students and staff cope with this unimaginable loss. As a substitute teacher, I was hired to provide extra support for students and staff. When I sat in Jordan's classroom a few days after the accident, I could feel the impact of his empty chair on his classmates. Our principal, along with Jordan's teachers, spoke at his funeral service and many staff members participated yesterday in a community event, #JordanStrong, to raise money for the family. Our public school is the heart of our community and, when tragedies happen, our public school is there to support our children and our families.

In Lake Mills, we are fortunate at this time to be able to afford school counselors in each of our buildings, a school psychologist on staff at all times, and extra staff to assist in times of need. In addition, we have art, music, and gym teachers, we have well-maintained libraries and LMC specialists in all of our buildings, we have up-to-date textbooks and materials, and we have well-maintained facilities. Isn't that what all students in our public schools deserve and isn't that our constitutional responsibility?

As you've heard in previous hearings, that is not the case around the state and we're not meeting our constitutional responsibility to provide an equally excellent public education for all students. Because of revenue limits, Jordan's chair in Lake Mills is valued at \$9,739. Depending on where a student lives in Wisconsin, his/her chair could be valued anywhere from \$9,100 to over \$20,000. It's time to value all of our children equitably, at the least, phase in a \$12,000 revenue limit per pupil so that, in school districts like mine, we can maintain and build on our programs and resources and so that, across the state, we can provide those programs and resources for all children.

Being able to care for our children when they're faced with a tragedy like we were last week requires financial resources. A friend from Milwaukee told me a story recently of a public school student who died unexpectedly this semester, and how there were not enough school counselors or psychologists on hand because they were all busy filling end-of-year IEP requests for the private schools our public school staffs are also mandated to serve. I couldn't help but think, is Jordan's empty chair more valuable than that student's in Milwaukee? How are we making sure we give all of our children the resources they need to succeed? In Lake Mills currently, \$57,000 is sent to Lakeside Lutheran High School through the voucher program. Our taxpayers never had a choice in sending this money to a private school and, as this amount increases, our taxpayers will not have a choice as our public school financial resources decline and we can no longer offer the services we do now. It is time for full taxpayer transparency on voucher costs and spending so local citizens have control over how their tax dollars are spent and it is time for a moratorium on voucher expansion until the costs and effectiveness of the voucher program can be carefully evaluated.

Our last day of school in Lake Mills is this Friday, June 8th. When the 4th graders process out of the gym for the last time, they are planning to wheel out an empty chair decorated in memory and honor of Jordan. As you deliberate on all you've heard at these hearings, I hope your decisions will support the public schools that are the heart of our communities, that will meet our Constitutional obligation to meet the educational needs of all students in public schools, and that will provide the resources to meet not only the academic needs of our children, but also the social and emotional needs of our children when they experience an empty chair in their classrooms.

Thank you.